

The Privilege of Suffering

If serving God is such a good thing, why does it often bring us so much grief? A careful reading of the little book of Philippians unlocks this conundrum.

“For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake” (Phil. 1:29).



The word “granted” in this verse is defined as “to do something pleasant or agreeable . . . to do a favor” for another (Thayer). We are granted, for example, the privilege of believing in Christ unto salvation. That confidence in our Savior is a blessing, a favor, something positive that God has brought into our lives.

But Paul adds something else that strikes us as odd. The New Revised Standard Version captures the incongruity nicely: “[God] has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, *but of suffering for him as well*” (emphasis added). Suffering is a privilege graciously granted by God? How does that work?

Let’s start by noticing that the suffering under consideration is not the suffering that is common to humanity (disease, tragedy, crime, death, etc.). Rather, it is the suffering that is endured “on behalf of Christ”; that is, we suffer hardship as a direct consequence of our allegiance to Him. Christians have historically been outliers in a world that does not understand our loyalty to a crucified Jew, so we are routinely maligned, ridiculed, mocked—sometimes even tortured and killed—for our beliefs. And that’s a *good* thing?

This makes no sense. The psychological, emotional, and physical wounds that we suffer as a result of our faith are painful and distressing. How can they be considered a gracious gift from God in any sense of the word?

Read through the rest of this epistle, and clues emerge that explain how this works.

First, our suffering for Christ provides a powerful testimony to unbelievers about the nature of the cause we represent. In a world dominated by pride and selfishness, ours is a life of humility and service to others, imitating the example of our Lord (2:2-8). That lifestyle stands in stark contrast to what most people live with, and they notice it. “In the midst of a crooked and perverse generation . . . you shine as lights in the world” (2:15). Even if unbelievers cannot bring themselves to accept the truth of our message, at least they have a grudging respect for its wisdom and our tenacity in living it. We have an opportunity to bring goodness into a world of sin and darkness—even as we are being crushed for doing so. We are the ones whom God has chosen to display that sacrificial goodness. That’s an honor we should gladly accept.

Second, our suffering for Christ strengthens our faith. Paul’s own life was an example of this principle. As a believer he had “suffered the loss of all things” (3:8) yet discovered that he could “do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (4:13). Paul promised his friends “the peace of God, which . . . will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (4:7). Suffering in behalf of Christ is not a burden to be endured, but a discipline through which we can find a cause for rejoicing (4:4).

Finally, when we suffer for Christ in this life, our hope of a better life to come is reinforced. Our citizenship is in heaven (3:20), and whatever struggles we encounter in this life only intensify our longing for our arrival in that eternal home. We look forward to a final reunion with Christ, “who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body” (3:20-21).

So, the next time someone laughs at your convictions, reflect on what Paul is saying here. The ridicule hurts, yes, but that’s part of the package you signed up for when you cast your lot with Jesus your King. Learn to view this suffering, not as a breakdown in God’s plan, but as a privilege to be embraced with gratitude.

— David King